APPLICATION UNDER UNITED STATES PATENT LAWS

Invention: **CONTAINER TRACKING SYSTEM**

Inventors: John W. PEEL;
Tell A. GATES; and
Thomas R. TOPPING

Manelli DENISON & SELTER PLLC
2000 M Street, N.W.
7th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036-3307
Attorneys
Telephone: (202) 261-1000

This is a:

[ ] Provisional Application

[X] Regular Utility Application

[ ] Continuing Application

[ ] PCT National Phase Application

[ ] Design Application

[ ] Reissue Application

[ ] Plant Application

SPECIFICATION

CONTAINER TRACKING SYSTEM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to a container tracking system. More particularly, it relates to an apparatus and technique for allowing a shipping container to disburse sensor information through a network formed with other shipping containers.

2. Background of Related Art

Terrorism has brought the reality of threats outside of the United States possibly shipping hazardous substances such as biological, radioactive waste, nuclear, chemical, etc. into the United States for use in a terrorist act. Such possibilities have resulted in a need for increased security relating to shipping containers.

The U.S.'s maritime borders include 95,000 miles of open shoreline, and 361 ports. The U.S. relies on ocean transportation for 95 percent of cargo tonnage that moves in and out of the country. Each year more than 7,500 commercial vessels make approximately 51,000 port calls, and over six million loaded shipping containers enter U.S. ports. Current growth predictions indicate that container cargo will quadruple in the next twenty years.

Fig. **9** illustrates a conventional cargo hazard detection system for a package **900** within a truck **901**.

The conventional cargo hazard detection system for a package **900** within a truck **901**, includes a package hazard sensor **902**, a satellite communications transmitter **903**, a communications satellite **904**, and a central database **908**.

A package hazard sensor **902** monitors for potential hazards within the package **900** and transmits an alarm signal to the satellite communications transmitter **903**.

The package hazard sensor **902** relies on radio frequency signal reflection or infrared light signal reflection to transmit its information to a satellite communications transmitter **903** attached to the top of the truck **901**.

Once a determination is made that a potential hazardous substance inside of the package **900** has been detected by the package hazard sensor **902** the hazard signal is transmitted to the communications satellite **904**. The communications satellite **904** relays the hazard signal produced by the hazard sensor **902** to the central database **908**.

A user at the central database **908** is alerted as to the existence of the hazard signal and responds appropriately according to the type of hazard detected. For instance, if the hazard is a chemical leak, a chemical clean-up team is sent to investigate the shipping container and respond accordingly.

Thus, the prior art requires either signal reflection, using RF transmissions, or a line of sight using infrared transmissions, for a hazard sensor to relay its information to a central database.

Fig. **10** illustrates a conventional cargo ship.

The conventional cargo ship **1001** carries a plurality of conventional shipping containers **1002**. The plurality of conventional shipping containers **1002** are placed within various parts of the ship **1001**. Some of the conventional shipping containers **1002** are at the top of a stack **1003** of conventional shipping containers **1002**. Some of the shipping containers are at the bottom of a stack **1004** of conventional shipping containers **1002**.

On the conventional cargo ship **1001**, there is a lack of sensors for determining potential hazards within the conventional cargo containers **1002**.

Accordingly, there is a need to sense hazards aboard cargo ships before the cargo is placed on trucks for delivery. Moreover, there is a need to transmit sensor information from a shipping container when the

shipping container is stacked underneath a plurality of other shipping containers. Moreover, there is a need to be able to transmit sensor information from a shipping container over a plurality of communication paths in the event that one of the communication paths is unavailable.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A Container Tracking System (CTS) that is based on an inexpensive terminal is attached to each shipping container and provides ongoing position tracking, intrusion detection, and hazardous substance monitoring. The CTS will interface with a variety of optional sensors that can provide chemical, biological, and nuclear detection capability with real-time reporting of the detection. The CTS detection equipment will also analyze the contents of the container and will report them back to the central database to match against a shipping manifest.

In accordance with the principles of the present invention, a shipping container tracking system comprises at least one shipping container sensor adaptively attached to a first shipping container to sense at least one of a condition of the first shipping container and a condition of at least one item within the first shipping container, a shipping container communication adapter to adaptively communicate with a second shipping container.

A method of distributing data obtained from sensors adaptively attached to a shipping container in accordance with another aspect of the present invention comprises establishing a network connection between a first shipping container and a second shipping container, and transmitting sensor data from the first shipping container to the second shipping container.

In accordance with the principles of yet another aspect of the present invention, a shipping container tracking system comprises at least one shipping container sensor adaptively attached to a first shipping container to sense at least one of a condition of the first shipping

container and a condition of at least one item within the first shipping container, a shipping container communication adapter to adaptively communicate with a second shipping container, a satellite communication adapter, and a radio adapter. The shipping container tracking system transmits sensor data using one of the satellite communication adapter and the radio adapter, and if the transmission of the sensor data fails using one of the satellite communication adapter and the radio adapter, the shipping container tracking system transmits sensor data using the other of the satellite communication adapter and the radio adapter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the following description with reference to the drawings, in which:

Fig. **1** shows a container tracking system, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **2** is a detailed view of a cargo ship carrying shipping containers, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **3** is a block diagram of terminal interconnectivity as utilized by the container tracking system, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **4** shows a shipping container, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **5** shows an alternate block diagram of terminal interconnectivity as utilized by the container tracking system, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **6** is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process by which information is transmitted and received between terminals, a satellite communication system, a GPS satellite system, a radio tower, and a central database as shown in Figs. **1-4**, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **7** is a flow chart of a subroutine for determining a best shipping container within an Ad-Hoc network to transmit a hazard signal.

Fig. **8** is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process by which information is transmitted and received between terminals, a satellite communication system, a GPS satellite system, a radio tower, a ship's bridge, and a central database as shown in Figs. **1, 2, 4** and **5**, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

Fig. **9** shows a conventional hazard detection system for delivery of a package using a truck.

Fig. **10** shows a conventional cargo ship carrying conventional shipping containers.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF ILLUSTRATIVE EMBODIMENTS

The present invention overcomes the disadvantages of the prior art by networking shipping containers to allow information from any one shipping container to be more effectively transmitted to a radio signal path and/or a satellite. The invention is particularly useful for shipping containers being transported by a ship, where the shipping containers are stacked upon one another and the shipping containers within the hold of a cargo ship potentially can't transmit their information to a central database and/or the cargo ship's bridge.

The present invention provides an apparatus and method for determining hazard information related to a shipping container and relaying that hazard information to a central database, if necessary through other shipping containers. While being described herein as used with shipping containers for transport by a ship, the apparatus and method of the present invention is perfectly suited for other free-moving forms of transportation for shipping containers including, but not limited to, buses, vans, trucks, trains, etc.

Fig. **1** provides a system level view of the Container Tracking System (CTS), in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

In particular, as illustrated in Fig. **1**, the Container Tracking System indicated generally at **100**, is comprised of a central database **110**, a satellite dish **120**, a communications satellite **130**, a radio tower **140**, a Global Positioning System satellite system **150**, shipping containers **160**, a cargo ship **170** carrying the shipping containers **160**, a ship's bridge **180**, a communications buoy **185**, a Coast Guard boat **195**, and a terminal **190** attached to each shipping container **160**.

Information about the cargo and the integrity of the shipping container **160** is determined by a terminal **190**, described in more detail below in Fig. **2**, attached to each shipping container **160**.

If the terminal **190** attached to the shipping container **160** determines that a hazardous substance is aboard the ship **170** and/or that the integrity of one of the shipping containers **160** has been breached, an alarm signal is formed at the terminal **190**.

A determination of the current location of the shipping container **160** is performed by terminal **190** by taking a reading from the GPS satellite system **150**.

The alarm signal from terminal **190** attached to one of the shipping containers **160** is preferable transmitted to a first predetermined transmission path, e.g., communication satellite **130**. Part of the satellite communication transmission path to the central database **110** includes the satellite dish **120**.

The communication satellite **130** represents any currently available and future available communication satellites that include, e.g. Low Earth Orbiting (LEO) Constellations and Geo-Synchronous satellite systems.

If the preferable transmission path is unavailable for any reason, terminal **190** will try a second transmission path, e.g., a radio signal path to radio tower **140**. The radio tower **140** is either in direct communication with a terminal **190** and/or ship's bridge **180** or indirectly

through at least one at-sea communications buoy **185** radio tower that relay(s) radio transmissions to a shore-based radio tower **140** and/or a satellite communication path **130**.

Using any available transmission path, the communication satellite **130,** radio tower **140** or communications buoy **185**, the alarm signal will be transferred from terminal **190** attached to a shipping container **160** aboard cargo ship **170** to a central database **110**. The central database **110** is able to verify a content of a shipping container **160** by processing an alarm signal against a shipping manifest database.

The alarm signal is also transmitted to the ship's bridge **180** to alert the crew of cargo ship **170** that an alarm signal has been generated by a terminal **190** attached to the shipping container **160**,. Preferably, a serial number for the terminal **190** attached to the shipping container **160** that issued the hazard signal is cross-referenced to a shipping container **160** identification number (ID) that is transmitted with the alarm signal. In this manner, the crew of the cargo ship **170** is warned of a possible hazardous condition that exists on the cargo ship **170**, allowing them to take appropriate measures.

Preferably, Coast Guard boats **195** are also alerted to any alarm signals generated by a terminal **190** attached to a shipping container **160**. Coast Guard boats **195** are equipped to receive an alarm signal directly from a terminal **190** that is within an appropriate range, a ship's bridge **180**, a radio signal path including communications buoy **185** and radio tower **140**, and a satellite communication path **130**.

Alternately, a line of intermediary communications buoys **185** are be placed at sea at appropriate locations to test a container tracking system **100** functionality and/or to detect anomalies at a safe distance from port facilities, acting as a set of "trip wire" lines located strategically for U.S. Homeland Defense.

Fig. **2** shows a closer view of cargo ship **170** from Fig. **1**. In particular, cargo ship **170** comprises a plurality of terminals **190** attached to the shipping containers **160** in communication with each other and the ship's bridge **180**, potentially through repeaters/signal amplifiers **200**.

The terminals **190** attached to each of the shipping containers **160** form an Ad-Hoc network after being placed aboard the cargo ship **170**. The terminals **190** are either hard-wired together to form the Ad-Hoc network or wirelessly form an Ad-Hoc network.

A hard-wired network using, e.g., Ethernet, RS-232 connection, Token Ring, etc. requires either manually connecting shipping containers together with a cable or using the metal structure of the shipping container itself as a transmission media, similar to a HomePNA network or a HomePlug network. Preferably, a wireless network such as, e.g., an Ultra-Wide-Band wireless network, a Wi-Fi network, and/or a Bluetooth piconet is used to form the Ad-Hoc network connecting the terminals **190** attached to the shipping containers **160**.

The terminals **190** are connected to other terminals **190** either directly and/or through the repeaters/signal amplifiers **200** placed at strategic locations throughout the ship **170**. The repeaters/signal amplifiers **200** are used to assist in the creation of a wireless Ad-Hoc network when a terminal **190** is unable to directly communicate with another terminal **190** because of, e.g., interference, distance, etc.

Fig. **3** illustrates terminals **190a-190f** interconnected to form an Ad-Hoc network. Although only terminal **190a** is shown for simplicity to be in communication with a communications satellite **130**, a GPS satellite system **150**, a ship's bridge **180**, communications buoy **185**, a Coast Guard boat **195**, an intrusion detection sensor **310**, a hazard sensor **320**, and other miscellaneous sensors **330**, all of the terminals **190a-190f** have the same capability as terminal **190a**.

Once the terminals **190a-190f** are either hard-wired together to form a hard-wired Ad-Hoc network or placed in proximity to one another

to form a wireless Ad-Hoc network, terminals **190a-190f** automatically executes routines that designate one of the terminals **190a-190f** as a master device and the remaining devices are designated as slave devices. For example, terminals **190a** is designated as a master terminal, although any of the terminals **190a-190f** can be initially designated as a master terminal.

In a preferred embodiment, a Bluetooth piconet network is established between the terminals **190a-190f**. A Bluetooth piconet is limited to eight (**8**) active devices at any one time, one (**1**) master and seven (**7**) slaves. However, there can be any number of parked slaves in a piconet (up to **255** that are directly addressable by a parked slave address, but even more addressable by their BD_ADDR). The master can "swap out" active slaves for parked slaves to manage piconets for situations that require a large number of connected devices, i.e., a large number of cargo containers **160** that are conventionally carried by a cargo ship **170**. Alternately, smaller piconet networks can be interconnected to form a scatternet.

Master terminal **190a** communicates with the ship's bridge **180**, directly or through another terminal **190**, either by making the ship's bridge **180** a member of the Ad-Hoc network or by communication with the ship's bridge through a radio frequency and/or infrared transmission of information.

Intrusion detection sensor **310** is connected to the doors of a shipping container **160** to detect if items have been placed into or taken out of a shipping container **160** after the ship has left port. Preferably, a fiber optic type sensor is used to detect if the door has been opened. Any break in the light transmitted from a transmitter to a receiver indicates that that the door has been opened. A fiber optic intrusion sensor is free from being bypassed, i.e., jumpering a simple electrical switch to avoid tripping an alarm.

The container tracking system **100** will be designed to accept a number of different hazard sensors **320** and other miscellaneous sensors **330**. These miscellaneous sensors **330** can be used alone or in combination with hazard sensors **320**. Current sensors and expected improvements in this area include:

Nuclear Detectors

Gamma-ray detectors

Germanium orthogonal strip detectors have the opportunity to provide small and low cost Gamma-ray detectors.

Neutron detectors

Gallium Arsenide (GaAs)-based detectors with a coating semi-insulating GaAs with isotopically enriched boron or lithium. A neutron striking the coating releases a cascade of charged particles (an alpha particle and a lithium ion in the case of a thermal neutron striking ^{10}B) which excite free carriers in the GaAs active region. The carriers drift to the detector contacts under an applied voltage and the induced charge is detected and amplified.

Boron-carbide semiconductor diode smaller than a dime, can detect neutrons emitted by the materials that fuel nuclear weapons (University of Nebraska-Lincoln).

Biologic detectors

Development of ultraviolet semiconductor light sources, including light emitting diodes (LEDs) and laser diodes for detection of bio-agents such as anthrax. The ultraviolet light excites a bio-agent such as anthrax, causing it to give off a light of its own. The biological agent will then emit different wavelength photon. Based on the emitted photon, various bioagents can be detected.

Quantum dots combined with DNA micro-arrays provide a method of biological weapons analysis. A small "field-deployable biological-threat-detection system" will be able to identify different pathogens as well as to distinguish among strains of a single species.

Chemical detectors

Detectors based on mid-infrared lasers are sensitive to trace chemical amounts. A room-temperature inter-band III-V laser diode that emits at a mid IR wavelength greater using quantum wells grown on a GaSb substrate provides the mechanism to implement a small chemical detector.

The nuclear detectors, gamma-ray neutron detectors, biological and chemical detectors disclosed herein are not intended to be the only hazard detectors that are available for use with the container tracking system **100**, but are a small example of possible hazard detectors for use with the container tracking system **100** disclosed herein.

Other miscellaneous sensors **330** envisioned for use with the container tracking system include, e.g., temperature sensors for cargo that is temperature sensitive, moisture sensors for cargo that is moisture sensitive, heart beat sensors and/or CO_2 for detection of people and/or animals as cargo, etc.

The master terminal **190a** takes readings from a GPS satellite system **150** for a determination of the current location of the ship **170**. An alarm signal produced by any of the terminals **190a**-**190f** are relayed, directly or indirectly through other communication paths, to a communications satellite **130,** a radio tower **140**, a Coast Guard boat **195**, and/or a communications buoy **185**.

Fig. **4** illustrates a shipping container **160** of the type for use with the container tracking system **100** in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

The shipping container **160** is comprised of an intrusion detection sensor **310**, shipping container doors **420** and **430**, a communications satellite transmitter **440**, a GPS receiver **450**, a radio transmitter **460** and hazard sensors **320**.

The intrusion detection sensor **310** is preferably placed at a central location in relation to the doors **420** and **430** of the shipping

container **160**. A central location for the intrusion detection sensor **310** allows a single module to monitor opening of both/either of the two doors **320** and **330**, reducing the number of sensors the terminal **190** must interface with, although multiple intrusion detection sensors **310** can be utilized. Alternately, if a shipping container **160** is utilized that has a single door, the intrusion detector sensor **310** can be placed at any convenient location.

The communications satellite transmitter **440** is preferably placed on the top side of the shipping container **160**. Since a communications satellite **130** is positioned overhead of the shipping container **160**, placing the communications satellite transmitter **440** on top of the shipping container **160** facilitates obtaining the strongest signal from the communications satellite **130**.

Likewise, the GPS receiver **450** is preferably placed on the top side of the shipping container **160**. Since a GPS satellite system **150** is positioned overhead of the shipping container **160**, placing the GPS satellite receiver **450** on top of the shipping container **160** facilitates obtaining the strongest signal from the GPS satellite system **150**.

A radio transmitter **460** is preferably placed on the side of the shipping container **160**. Since radio communications are terrestrial based communications, placing the radio transmitter **460** on the side of the shipping container **160** facilitates obtaining the strongest signal from a radio tower **140** and/or communications buoy **185**.

The hazard sensors **320** are placed at any points within the shipping container **160** that facilitates performing their necessary readings. Although Fig. **4** illustrates the use of a plurality of hazard sensors **320** placed at various points along the walls and floor of the shipping container **160**, the placement is exemplary. Alternately, a single housing can be used to house the plurality of hazard sensors **320** and

placed at a strategic and/or convenient location in/on the shipping container **160**.

Although the satellite communications transmitter **440**, GPS receiver **450** and radio transmitter **460** are exemplarily shown respectively on the top and side of the shipping container **160**, the satellite communications transmitter **440** and radio transmitter **460** can be attached to the shipping container **160** at any points that are convenient and/or that facilitate communications.

Although Fig. **4** illustrates a single satellite communications transmitter **440**, a single GPS receiver and a single radio transmitter **460**, any number of satellite communications transmitters **440**, GPS receivers and radio transmitters **460** can be used to facilitate the transmission and reception of information. For example, a radio transmitter **460** can be located on all four surrounding sides of the shipping container **160**. In this manner, radio communications are optimized for any direction the cargo ship **170** and the shipping container **160** are oriented.

The terminal **190** and radio transmitter **460** will be implemented in a Software Defined Radio (SDR) structure using either conventional or optical processing approaches. This allows the terminal to talk to each of existing Low Earth Orbiting (LEO) Constellations and a GSM or other cell phone interface. The SDR approach allows for future expansion if new systems are brought on-line, protecting infrastructure investment.

The terminal **190** attached to each shipping container **160** utilizes a universal satellite communications interface that communicates with any of the three Low Earth Orbiting (LEO) communication constellations, Iridium, Globalstar, or Orbcomm and geo-synchronous satellites. In addition, terminal **190** utilizes a radio interface, e.g., the GSM or other standard cell phone infrastructure when on or close to shore. Routine ongoing position tracking can be performed utilizing the GPS system, reporting on a regular schedule or in an operator query

mode. In the event that an intrusion or hazardous substance is detected by a sensor **320** and/or **330**, an alarm signal would be immediately reported via a communications satellite transmitter **440** or a radio transmitter **460** and/or to the ship's bridge **180**.

The multi-satellite system interoperability is critical to the container tracking system **100**. It provides system level redundancy, i.e., a failure of one constellation (technical or business wise) does not render the system useless. Ancillary advantages include maintaining post deployment cost competitiveness to eliminate a potential monopolistic pricing structure.

Fig. **5** illustrates an alternate embodiment to the container tracking system **100** as shown in Fig. **3**. Terminals **190a**-**190f** interconnected to form an Ad-Hoc network while in communication with a ship's bridge **180**, an intrusion detection sensor **310**, a hazard sensor **320**, and other miscellaneous sensors **330**. In this embodiment, the ship's bridge **180** performs the necessary communications with the radio tower **140**, the communications satellite **130**, communications buoy **185** and the GPS satellite system **150**.

Master terminal **190a** communicates with the ship's bridge, directly or through another terminal **190**, either by making the ship's bridge a member of the Ad-Hoc network or by communication through a radio frequency and/or infrared transmission of information. Any alarm signals produced by any of the terminals **190a**-**190f** are forwarded to the ship's bridge **180**.

The ship's bridge **180** takes readings from the GPS satellite system **150** for a determination of the current location of the ship. An alarm signal produced by any of the terminals **190a-190f** are relayed, directly or indirectly through other communication paths, from the ship's bridge **180** to a communications satellite **130,** a radio tower **140**, a Coast Guard boat **195**, and/or a communications buoy **185**.

This alternate embodiment has an advantage of reduced costs for individual terminals **190a-190f** by moving a satellite transmitter **440** and a radio transmitter **460** from the shipping container **160** to the ship's bridge **180**.

Fig. **6** is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process by which information is exchanged between the terminals **190a-190f** attached to shipping containers **160** as shown in Figs. **1-3**, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

In step **602**, a network connection is established between all of the shipping containers **160** on a ship **170**.

As discussed above, the network that is established between the shipping containers is an Ad-Hoc network. The Ad-Hoc network is either a hard-wired or a wireless network of shipping containers.

In step **603**, an inventory of all the shipping containers **160** that exist on a ship **170** is performed.

The first time step **603** is performed, the initial inventory value when a ship **170** first leaves port is stored for later comparison to an inventory value when the ship **170** is en-route.

When a piconet is employed, the inventory of shipping containers **160** is preferable performed shortly after the ship **170** has left port. Performing the inventory of shipping containers **160** after the ship **170** is at a predetermined distance from other objects prevents other piconet devices from being inadvertently inventoried as belonging to the ship's piconet. The system can monitor RF signal multi-path characteristics between terminals **190** to establish the "crystalline structure" of an array of shipping containers **160**. If a container **160** is added and/or subtracted, this will be reported for investigation.

In step **613**, a decision is made if a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the Ad-Hoc network. The decision is

made by comparing the initial inventory value taken when the ship **170** left port to an updated inventory value taken when a ship is en-route.

If a shipping container **160** has been added to the Ad-Hoc network after an initial inventory, a hazardous substance or a hazardous item has possibly been added to the ship's inventory, requiring investigation. Likewise, if a shipping container **160** has been subtracted from the ship's inventory, possibly a hazardous substance or a hazardous item has been removed from the ship **170**, requiring investigation.

If the determination in step **613** is that a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory, the process branches to step **604**. In step **604**, an alarm is formulated indicating that that a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory.

In step **605**, a subroutine is executed for a determination as to which terminal **190** attached to a shipping container **160** within the Ad-Hoc network is optimally used to transmit the alarm signal.

A more detailed flow chart for subroutine **605** is described in Fig. **7** and its accompanying text below.

In step **606**, the alarm signal is transmitted using whatever communications path was determined as available in step **605**.

In step **607**, the terminal **190** that transmitted the alarm signal informs other terminals **190** that the alarm signal has been transmitted. This prevents the other terminals **190** from re-executing subroutine **605**, indicating a communications path was not available the previous instance it was executed.

The process branches back to step **603** to repeat the process of determining if a shipping container **160** has been added to subtracted from the ship's inventory and/or if a hazard sensor has produced an alarm.

If the determination in step **613** is that a shipping container has not been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory, the process

branches to step **608**. In step **608**, a reading is made of the sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping container **160** terminal **190**.

In step **618**, a decision is made based on the reading of sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping container **160** terminal **190** performed by step **608**. If a sensor has detected an abnormality associated with a shipping container **160**, e.g., detection of a hazardous substance, a shipping container **160** has been opened en-route, etc. the process branches to step **609**.

If none of the sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping containers detect an abnormality, the process branches back to step **603** where the process for determining if a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory and reading of terminal **190** sensors **320** and **330** is repeated.

Fig. **7** is a flow chart illustrating subroutine **605** discussed above in Fig. **6** in more detail, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

In step **701**, a test is performed of a preferred transmission path, e.g., a satellite transmission path **130**.

In step **711**, a decision is made based on the test performed in step **701**. If the first transmission path is a good communications path, the subroutine ends and process flow returns to the process that called the subroutine with an indication as to the transmission path to use to transmit an alarm signal. If the decision in step **711** is that the first transmission path is not a good communications path, the process branches to step **721**.

In step **721**, a decision is made if the number of times a first transmission path has been tested has reached a predetermined value. If the number of times the first transmission path has been tested has not reached the predetermined value, the process branches back to step **701**. If the number of times the first transmission path has been tested has reached the predetermined value, the process branches to step **702**.

In step **702**, a test is performed of an alternate transmission path, e.g., a radio transmission path **140**.

In step **712**, a decision is made based on the test performed in step **702**. If the alternate transmission path is a good communications path, the subroutine ends and process flow returns to the process that called the subroutine with an indication as to the transmission path to use to transmit an alarm signal. If the decision in step **712** is that the alternate transmission path is not a good communications path, the process branches to step **722**.

In step **722**, a decision is made if the number of times an alternate transmission path has been tested has reached a predetermined value. If the number of times the alternate transmission path has been tested has not reached the predetermined value, the process branches back to step **702**. If the number of times the alternate transmission path has been tested has reached the predetermined value, the process branches to step **703**.

In step **703**, a notification is sent to the ship's bridge that an alarm signal could not be transmitted from the ship.

Although the exemplary process shown in Fig. **7** shows two potential transmission paths for the transmission of an alarm signal, the number of possible transmission paths is only limited by the number of transmission paths a shipping container **160** terminal **190** and/or a ship's bridge **180** subscribers to.

Fig. **8** is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process by which information is exchanged between the terminals **190a**-**190f** attached to shipping containers **160** as shown in Fig. **1, 2** and **5**, in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

In step **802**, a network connection is established between all of the shipping containers **160** on a ship **170**.

As discussed above, the network that is established between the shipping containers is an Ad-Hoc network. The Ad-Hoc

network is either a hard-wired or a wireless network of shipping containers.

In step **803**, an inventory of all the shipping containers **160** that exist on a ship **170** is performed.

The first time step **803** is performed, the initial inventory value when a ship **170** first leaves port is stored for later comparison to an inventory value when the ship **170** is en-route.

When a piconet is employed, the inventory of shipping containers **160** is preferable performed shortly after the ship **170** has left port. Performing the inventory of shipping containers **160** after the ship **170** is at a predetermined distance from other objects prevents other piconet devices from being inadvertently inventoried as belonging to the ship's piconet.

In step **813**, a decision is made if a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the Ad-Hoc network. The decision is made by comparing the initial inventory value taken when the ship **170** left port to an updated inventory value taken when a ship is en-route.

If a shipping container **160** has been added to the Ad-Hoc network after an initial inventory, a hazardous substance or a hazardous item has possibly been added to the ship's inventory, requiring investigation. Likewise, if a shipping container **160** has been subtracted from the ship's inventory, possibly a hazardous substance or a hazardous item has been removed from the ship **170**, requiring investigation.

If the determination in step **813** is that a shipping container **160** has been added and/or subtracted from the ship's inventory, the process branches to step **804**. In step **804**, an alarm is formulated indicating that that a shipping container **160** has been added and/or subtracted from the ship's inventory.

In step **805**, an alarm signal is transmitted, either directly or through other shipping containers **160**, to the ship's bridge **180**.

In step **806**, the alarm signal is transmitted from the ship's bridge **180** using whatever communications path that is desirable and/or available, e.g., a radio communication path and/or a satellite communication path, to a desired destination location, e.g., a central database **110**. The ship's bridge **180** performs a subroutine similar to the one shown in Fig. **7** for determining a best transmission path to transmit a hazard signal.

The process branches back to step **803** to repeat the process of determining if a shipping container **160** has been added to subtracted from the ship's inventory and/or if a hazard sensor has detected an alarm condition.

If the determination in step **813** is that a shipping container has not been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory, the process branches to step **808**. In step **808**, a reading is made of the sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping container **160** terminal **190**.

In step **818**, a decision is made based on the reading of sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping container **160** terminal **190** performed by step **808**. If a sensor has detected an abnormality associated with a shipping container **160**, e.g., detection of a hazardous substance, a shipping container **160** has been opened en-route, etc. the process branches to step **809**.

If none of the sensors **320** and **330** attached to the shipping containers detect an abnormality, the process braches back to step **803** where the process for determining if a shipping container **160** has been added or subtracted from the ship's inventory and reading of terminal **190** sensors **320** and **330** is repeated.

Preferably, the shipping container **160** terminal **190** is powered by a suitable power source. For instance, long life batteries (e.g., Lithium batteries) are preferred, but rechargeable batteries, and/or solar power is possible either instead of batteries or in addition to batteries as is somewhat common in some dual powered calculators.

In accordance with the principles of the present invention, a same shipping container **160** terminal **190** can be used on multiple ships without reconfiguration, since each use a standardized Ad-Hoc network protocol.

In accordance with the principles of the present invention, information passing between shipping container **160** terminals **190** and/or information passing between the shipping container **160** terminal **190** and the central database **110** is preferably encrypted. Encryption ensures that that alarm signals produced by sensors **320** and **330** are reliably transmitted within the Ad-Hoc network and/or to the central database **110**.

In accordance with the principles of the present invention, terminal **190** interrogation capability is provided on Coast Guard **195** or other government related vessels to verify system functionality and/or to detect anomalies prior to the cargo ship entering port facilities.

In accordance with the principles of the present invention, a log of anomalies is stored at a central point on the ship **170** and/or at each of the terminals **190** during transport by the ship **170**. When the shipping containers **160** are off-loaded from the ship **170** at a shipping yard or rail yard, data from the terminals **190** is downloaded and check for anomalies detected during transport.

While the invention has been described with reference to the exemplary embodiments thereof, those skilled in the art will be able to make various modifications to the described embodiments of the invention without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention.